

THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

Service Learning and Compassionate Leadership

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I have been asked to speak tonight about the concepts of 'service learning' and compassionate leadership.

I want to speak from my own experience. Following my graduation from McGill I went overseas with CUSO; its motto at the time was "Serve and Learn". We didn't understand that at first: we thought we were about helping and teaching. It was only toward the end of our assignments that we realized (and some of us never did) that where we thought we were giving, we were in fact receiving, and where we thought we were teaching, we actually were learning. It was a humbling realization, it felt somehow as though we, who had had the privilege of receiving this extraordinary opportunity of being immersed in another culture, were also deriving the greatest share of the benefit: privilege compounded. But at least we learned humility.

We learned more than that of course. Specifically, what did I learn?

First, I learned to listen. Living in another culture, surrounded by people speaking a language one doesn't understand, means that you have to develop the skills to communicate cross-culturally, often non-verbally, always attuned to the most subtle cues to how you are supposed to behave. Second, I learned about dependence and vulnerability, and about trust. It took a hitchhiking expedition across the Sahara on my own to teach me that I am not always master of my fate, and that Western concepts of task and time don't travel well. Finally, I learned about appreciating complexity, that interventions that introduce change without truly understanding the dynamics and relationships at play, are seldom successful and sometimes dangerous.

My two-year CUSO assignment, which already seemed like half a lifetime before I embarked, ended up turning into a five year stint in West Africa. That was less a conscious decision than an acknowledgement of how much ignorance I had to overcome before I could be of the slightest use to anyone. Each additional day reminded me that I still had a great deal to learn about the countries and cultures I worked in - and then I decided it was time to get back to Canada before I lost touch with my own country and culture. My time in West Africa, and subsequent work in the Sudan and South Asia, did not turn me into a 'development expert'. What I learned was less about 'development' and more about people. It set the course of my life not by making me commit myself to a career in *development* (I still don't know what it means) but by making me committed to change and fascinated to know why and how people change.

And that is what I want to talk about tonight: change. There is nothing new about change, of course. Every generation has sought to improve the world; what is sometimes referred to dismissively as the idealism of youth is a cliché but it is also the core of the American Dream. However today's young people face a new challenge: to restore the world. And today's young Canadians have the added challenge of doing it without the advantages that their parents had, the heritage of a country blessed with almost unequalled human and natural resources in a world where those assets are very unevenly distributed.

In a Commencement Address which he gave earlier this month at the University of Portland Paul Hawken said “the planet came with a set of operating instructions but we seem to have misplaced them”. Simple things like not poisoning the water or wiping out other species. My generation used its inheritance of sixty years of post-World War II peace and unprecedented prosperity, which is what our parents bequeathed to us, to indulge ourselves. We took care of our present, but today’s youth will have to look to the needs of everybody’s future. In the post-industrial world this may be the first generation that does not receive as its birthright the prospect of a longer and better life in a healthy ecosphere.

So change is coming, and it will be for the better. The odd thing about change is that we tend to see it in terms of the other. Just as development was once thought to be about helping others to become like us, in their standard of living, their values, their lifestyles, so change is often seen in terms of how other people must change. Gandhi famously said “Be the change you want to see in the world” but most of us actually would prefer to just exhort, advocate or legislate how we think others should be in the world. For us to commit ourselves to effecting change requires that we deeply understand why it is necessary – even if it entails some short-term pain and loss of privilege for ourselves. That is why real change is less a product of analysis and thinking than of seeing and feeling.

That is why a different kind of learning is needed, learning with the heart as well as with the mind. To look at the current situation, for example, our heads tell us that the economic decline we are experiencing now is painful, but that with appropriate policies and some restructuring and adjustment, the market soon will get us back to where we were, furiously producing and consuming, generating profits, and enjoying our affluence. Our hearts, however, tell a different story: that the way we have been living is unsustainable, wasteful and unjust in how its benefits are distributed, and that we could live with less and not give up one iota of our potential for happiness or fulfillment.

Our heads tell us that it makes political sense to shore up what has existed, to bail out failing industries, to cater to powerful interests and to tell people that when this ‘correction’ is over we can once again enjoy our SUV lifestyles. Our hearts tell us that we have to share the planet better for everyone’s sake, and that we are more likely to find fulfillment in pursuing the meaning of a good life, than by acquiring the means to buy the good life.

“Service learning”, though I am inclined to believe that term is a misnomer, is an example of that different kind of learning. It is really a form of experiential learning, sharpened in a cross-cultural setting or in any situation that pushes us out of our comfort zone. It can produce that heightened sensitivity and extra alertness and even anxiety that signal to us that all our senses are finely tuned to take in and make sense of everything that is going on around us, with no familiar signposts or comfortable poses to fall back on. We have probably all experienced that at one time or another; it is not always pleasant at the time, but afterward there is the exquisite joy of knowing that we have *learned* something, and that something has changed us forever.

The poet Mary Oliver captures the terror and courage of making this move in her poem *The Journey*:

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –*

*though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
Each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.*

The last line is not about being self-absorbed; it reminds us that our first task and responsibility is to change ourselves, not to try to save other people. To do that we have to go *deeper and deeper into the world* to find out who we truly are. It is frightening because while we are exhilarated by the new and strange, we also crave security; it is comforting to be with people like ourselves, not to live constantly on the edge. It takes courage because you are choosing your own path through life, as we all must do. It has been said that if you see your path stretching out ahead of you, *it's not your path*. We make our path with each step we take, every decision and choice we make, every time we think for ourselves or stand up for what we believe.

What gives us that courage? We have to cultivate certain qualities: imagination, empathy, compassion, a sense of justice or fairness to recognize when things are just *not right*. Curiously these are attributes that are often observed in children, but which wither through our years of schooling.

(We were reminded of that recently when 400 students walked out of their school in Keswick to protest the injustice of their Korean school mate being expelled when he defended himself against racist bullying. They taught the police and school authorities by their action more about fairness and empathy than any number of manuals and in-service training courses ever could).

And so we have to learn them all over again, by doing and being. By seeing that you can learn and serve, that indeed serving is a form of learning. For on reflection, I think that was the error we made in CUSO, to think that serving and learning were separate activities, one was giving to others and the other was benefiting from what we got in return. Jean Vanier's message, on the other hand, is that it is the act of serving others that teaches us about ourselves, and about our common humanity – including the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that we would prefer not to see.

I said that I thought the term “service learning” was a misnomer. The word ‘service’ comes with so many connotations – of doing for others, of giving, even of sacrifice, it doesn't convey the notion of mutuality, the idea that one is giving and receiving, learning and teaching by example. It is by learning about others, their hopes and aspirations and fears that one discovers oneself. For many of us who had that experience of working and living overseas, in a very different culture, one often described in terms of poverty, misery, or hopelessness, the shock was realizing how much poverty, misery and hopelessness existed in our own society (and sometimes in ourselves). It wasn't always material poverty in a country like Canada, of course, and much of the misery was hidden, but it was real nonetheless. It was just that here we could cross the street or avert our eyes to avoid it. In a culture that celebrates the individual it is possible to write off the poor and marginal simply as road kill on the highway to success.

I read in the Report of the l'Arche meeting that was held in Toronto in June 2007 the following statement: *“Human life is founded on the mystery of communion, of being and belonging together. We are always fragile and evolving. In this growth, we need to hold on to two ideas: to dream and to be tender. To dream is to imagine, to hope for the future. Although as humans we are very messy, we must also always have a dream of coming out of the mess. We have to believe that we can change things”.*

What drives change is not rational arguments that influence how people think so much as evident truths that influence how we behave. Of course, there is a need for data, analysis, strategies and so on but first there has to be a deep understanding of why change is needed and a vision of how things could be better. Seeing is believing, but sometimes we have to believe in order to see.

We are at a point today where growing numbers of people see the need for change: see that a society that measures itself by consumption is not healthy or balanced, that a culture that values individuals for what they do rather than who they are turns people into mere instruments; that sees growing disparities of wealth within and between countries as fundamentally unjust and inherently destabilizing.

We can dream of what we would like to see: a world that is at peace, environmentally sustainable, with economic opportunity, social acceptance and cultural riches for everybody, a world in which people are free to exercise choice, to develop their talents, to contribute fully to communities that are diverse, supportive and inclusive.

Is it ridiculous to imagine such a world? Is it not extraordinary that of all the thousands of species on this planet, ours is the only one that has the ability to look into the future, to exercise foresight? We alone are able to imagine something better – and then to take action to improve what exists. It is our ability to hope, and then to look ahead so as to anticipate and to plan that distinguishes humankind. Why then are we so unwilling or unable to use it?

Who are the leaders who will express this vision of a better world? *We are.*

As Albert Schweitzer said, “Example is not the main thing influencing others. It is the only thing.” It is by learning with the heart that we develop the understanding of ourselves and others that can give birth to a new vision of what is possible, that expresses our deepest feelings of connectedness and joy and fulfillment.

This might sound like Pollyanna, but it is reinforced by the knowledge coming out of our new scientific understanding of reality. I am referring to the shift from a Newtonian, mechanistic view of the world, the one we all grew up with and that seems like common sense, to a holistic quantum understanding of the world that is profoundly counter-intuitive and seems to make no sense at all. This ‘new’ knowledge is not new at all, of course, it is a hundred years old, but its implications are only beginning to seep into the way we view the world. In the old mechanistic view, the world is ‘out there’, composed of objects; to understand how it works we have to take it apart, examine the pieces, and put it back together. We are separate from it. Quantum theory describes a very different world, in which everything – including the observer – is connected; we are part of what we observe. So change, far from resulting from the application of external force, comes from within. Individual actions are not tiny and inconsequential (“what influence can I possibly have?”) but part of a dynamic that operates within the system undergoing change.

Expressing this same idea, Robert F. Kennedy said, “*Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (s)he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.*”

From service-learning to sweeping down “the walls of oppression and resistance” might seem like a mighty leap, but all social change starts with people. The right people to lead it are those who command respect not because of their power or status or self-importance, but who have self-knowledge and empathy and a compassion for others that is rooted in their own sense of imperfection and shared humanity. So who must be the leaders? We each must be, in whatever sphere we occupy. In the words of HH the Dalai Lama – surely a living exponent of compassionate leadership – “Every human being has the same potential for compassion. The only question is whether we really take care of that potential and develop and implement it in our daily life.”